

FOR AN INCLUSIVE LINGUISTIC IDENTITY

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A view of the library of Kannada University, Hampi. A grant of 320 crore given to Samskrit University has triggered a row at a time when Kannada University at Hampi has been paralysed for want of funds. Photo: Special Arrangement

Over the last couple of months, the pushback by some Kannada activist groups against the “hegemony” of Sanskrit has seen a renewed vigour. The BJP government in Karnataka stands accused of providing “step-motherly treatment” towards Kannada academic research, while promoting Karnataka Samskrit University, which was started by the BJP government during its previous regime.

The controversy centres around [a grant of 320 crore given to Samskrit University](#) at a time when Kannada University at Hampi has been paralysed [for want of funds](#). Kannada University’s financial condition has been so precarious that it has not admitted a single new student in three years, and it has been several months since it has paid all its employees. The government is pushing it to become “self-reliant”. The plight of Kannada University, earlier funded by the government, has triggered many campaigns in the last two years. It is in this context that the government’s promotion of Samskrit University has caused consternation.

This also comes on the heels of a PIL filed by several organisations, including an RSS affiliate, promoting Sanskrit learning and opposing the making of Kannada mandatory in undergraduate courses, a government order which the Karnataka High Court ordered to be set aside. One of the mostly unstated reasons behind the opposition to make Kannada mandatory is that doing so would reduce the number of students opting for Sanskrit, as most would opt for English as the other language under the two-language policy. The defence of the need to promote Sanskrit as the “mother of all languages”, apparently at the cost of Kannada, has made the State government’s affirmation that it is committed to the Kannada cause seem less credible.

At the same time, an online campaign for ‘Ellara Kannada’ (everyone’s Kannada) to simplify the Kannada alphabet by dropping features that it had borrowed from Sanskrit has picked up steam. First proposed by grammarian Shankara Bhat in the 2000s, it has now been re-articulated as a pushback against “Sanskrit hegemony” that has made the language “elitist and Brahminical”. Many spearheading the campaign this time come from the Dalit Bahujan communities. This renewed push against Sanskrit and “Brahminism” also comes in the backdrop of assertions by Brahmins in recent times. For instance, Brahmin organisations, including the government body Brahmin Development Board, ensured that criminal cases were booked against two Kannada film personalities for their criticism of “Brahminism.” This has led to polarisation among communities.

However, these articulations for a regional identity seem to lack political bite as there is no regional party in the State that champions this plank consistently. The JD(S), which comes closest to it, has not identified itself wholeheartedly as a regional party. Though Congress leader Siddaramaiah tried to project a federal plank against the ruling BJP back in 2017, with a State flag, anthem and an argument that the State has been financially victimised by the Union government, it did not go very far given that he is also from a national party. The emergence of the BJP as the single-largest party, just shy of majority in the 2018 Assembly polls, also implies it did not garner popular support.

Some academics have argued that even on the cultural front, the Kannada movement has

always had its roots in Hindutva. Many early stalwarts who articulated a Kannada identity were conservative, upper caste Hindus. However, forces that have argued for a more inclusive articulation of Kannada identity have always resisted the tide. The present debate is the latest instance of such resistance.

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